DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 599 CS 009 593

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TITLE Middle School Student Perceptions of Reading Practices: Sex Differences.
PUB DATE 23 Feb 89
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (Savannah, GA, February 23, 1989). Best copy available.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Females; Grade 6; Grade 7; Grade 8; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Males; *Middle Schools; *Reading Attitudes; School Surveys; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

The challenge that middle school age youngsters' rapidly changing sexual, emotional, and physical characteristics present to educators, has made these educators concerned with factors that have a bearing on instructional programs. A study was developed to assess the attitudes of middle school children toward reading and to determine whether there were any differences in attitude between males and females. Subjects, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in a rural county, were given a survey on reading attitudes. Three middle schools were involved, with students in one classroom per grade per school responding to the survey. Surveys were distributed to 272 students in all. Findings indicated that female middle school students' attitudes toward reading were more positive than those of males. (Eight tables of data are included, and a reading survey is appended.) (MS)

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The College of Education

Middle School Perceptions of Reading Practices : Sex Differences

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Middle School Perceptions of Reading Practices: Sex Differences

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Paper Presented at the
1989 Annual Conference of the
Eastern Educational Research Association
Savannah, Georgia
February 23, 1989

Interest in the characteristics and learning styles of middle school age youngsters has been receiving increasing attention. These youngsters, with rapidly changing sexual, emotional, and physical characteristics, have presented a challenge to educators. Individuals responsible for developing instructional programs are concerned with factors that have a bearing on the instructional program. This study was developed to assess the attitudes of middle school children toward reading and to determine whether there were any differences in attitude between males and females. In addition, attitudes towards reading as a function of grade placement were examined. It was hoped that the results of this study would provide direction for curriculum improvement, instructional changes, and identify areas needing more extensive study.

Sample and Procedure

The subjects of this study were middle school students in grades six, seven, and eight residing in a county classified as emerging rural. The socio-economic level of the students ranges from low to upper middle class. Three middle schools were involved in the study with students in one classroom per grade per school responding to the survey. The attitudes toward reading were part of a larger survey dealing with school climate. Surveys were developed and modified with the assistance of classroom teachers. Surveys were distributed by the reading specialist in each school. In an attempt to obtain honest responses, students were informed that all responses would be anonymous. As an additional precaution, classroom teachers were not present

during the data gathering. Surveys were distributed to 272 students who were asked to mark the responses on a Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Appendix A). Data were subjected to chi square tests by sex and grade placement to determine any significant differences.

Results and Discussion

Student responses toward teacher attitudes concerning the asking or answering of questions is shown in Table 1. Females had a more positive attitude toward this question. The chi square value was not statistically significant at the .05 level. The calculated value of 7.64, however, approaches instructional significance. Cross grade differences were not observed.

Table 1

Teacher Encourages Questions

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	36	41	22	17	10
Female	43	58	22	12	3
Chi Square= 7.64		DF= 4		Probability<.20	
Grade 8	33	44	14	9	4
Grade 7	24	35	16	10	5
Grade 6	22	20	14		4
Chi Square= 5.45		DF= 8		Probability <.70	

The widely used and recommended practice of discussing a story prior to reading was assessed in the next question. The extent of this practice varies depending upon the use of a basal reader or literature. As the data in Table 2 show, there were no significant differences between sexes or across grade levels for this practice.

Table 2

Discussing Stories Prior to Reading Them

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	21	50	30	12	13
Female	26	55	34	15	9
Chi Square= 1.35		DF= 4		Probability<.90	
Grade 8	17	40	31	8	9
Grade 7	18	34	22	8	9
Grade 6	12	31	11	11	4
Chi Square= 8.16		DF= 8		Probability<.50	

Research on learning styles indicates that for some students a writing component helps in learning achievement. Teacher requirements for a written response is used to assess the completion of an assignment and as an aid to learning. Student perception and the value of this practice revealed that there was a statistical difference between the sexes on this practice, with the females having a more positive attitude. As shown in Table 3, there was also a significant difference across grade levels.

Table 3

Writing Out Answers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	12	59	30	19	6
Female	24	65	21	14	15
Chi Square= 9.87		DF= 4		Probability<.05	
Grade 8	15	49	20	16	4
Grade 7	11	44	21	3	12
Grade 6	10	31	10	14	5
Chi Square= 17.42		DF= 8		Probability<.05	

Although "round robin reading" is not a significant part of the instructional program, teachers will have students read portions of text aloud for a variety of purposes. Proper oral reading for a specific purpose and reading to prove or substantiate an answer do occur.

Attitudes toward this practice did not differ between the sexes or across grade levels.

Table 4

Reading Aloud

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	32	46	18	21	10
Female	45	49	25	12	8
Chi Square= 5.57		DF= 4		Probability<.30	
Grade 8	23	36	18	19	8
Grade 7	31	30	15	8	7
Grade 6	23	29	1	6	3
Chi Square= 9.34		DF= 8		Probability<.50	

The frequently criticized and maligned worksheets, dittos, and workbooks were evaluated by the students. Female students viewed these activities as an aid to learning in a more positive manner than did the males. The chi square calculated was significant at less than the .02 level. As indicated in Table 5, there was no significant difference across grade levels.

Table 5

Completing Worksheets and Dittos

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	17	51	27	22	6
Female	31	47	43	10	10
Chi Square= 12.23		DF= 4		Probability<.02	
Grade 8	16	45	23	14	6
Grade 7	18	32	26	11	3
Grade 6	14	21	21	7	7
Chi Square= 7.41		DF= 8		Probability<.50	

County practice dictates that instruction must be provided to students so that they may successfully complete the state mandated functional reading test prior to graduation. Instruction begins in the middle of grade six with seventh grade students taking a pre-functional reading test. The content and extent of instruction is based on the pre-test results. No sex differences were found. The highly significant differences across grades ,in part, is attributed to lack of sixth grade students' experience in the process.

Table 6

Functional Reading

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	23	17	43	26	15
Female	18	14	63	23	24
Chi Square= 5.74		DF= 4		Probability<.30	
Grade 8	16	16	40	24	10
Grade 7	22	10	23	15	20
Grade 6	3	5	43	10	9
Chi Square= 33.09		DF= 8		Probability<.01	

Student perceptions of their skills in decoding unfamiliar words were assessed. A somewhat gratifying result was obtained with the preponderance of students selecting the "strongly agree" and "agree" options. Evidently students have learned and developed strategies for identifying unfamiliar words. As indicated in Table 7, there were no significant differences between sexes or across grades.

Table 7

Unfamiliar Words

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Male	46	61	8	6	6
Female	57	62	10	6	8
Chi Square=.745		DF= 4		Probability<.95	
Grade 8	38	49	7	5	4
Grade 7	29	47	9	4	6
Grade 6	36	27	2	3	4
Chi Square= 9.08		DF= 8		Probability<.50	

Table 8 shows the results of computing means of the responses for the seven questions asked. Means were calculated by assigning a value of 5 for strongly agree and progressing to a value of 1 for a strongly disargee response. The data are ranked in Table 8 in decreasing order.

Table 8

Mean Ranking of All Responses

	Male	Female	Total
1. Unknown word	4.06	4.07	4.07
2. Encourages questions	3.60	3.91	3.77
3. Read aloud	3.54	3.79	3.67
4. Worksheets	3.41	3.56	3.49
5. Talk about story	3.43	3.53	3.48
6. Write answers	3.41	3.50	3.46
7. Functional reading	3.05	2.86	2.95

As the table above shows, female middle school students were more positive concerning the instructional program than the males. A Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was calculated between the responses

of the male and female responses. A correlation coefficient of 0.919 was obtained which is significant at the .01 level.

Implications

The data from this study indicate that female middle school students' attitudes toward reading are more positive than those of males. The questions where statistically significant differences were observed dealt with writing answers to questions and completing workbook assignments. Male attitudes toward these activities is less positive. The challenge for middle school teachers is to find ways of providing alternative assessment or follow-up activities which favor more active male involvement. The data also indicates that the anonymous reponses to the questions were quite positive and indicate that current practices are appropriate.

Reading Survey

School_____ Title of Reading Book_____

Grade_____ Male_____ Female_____

How much do you agree with the following statements about reading? Place an X in the column which indicates how you feel about each statement.

	A Strongly Agree	B Agree	C Undecided	D Disagree	E Strongly Disagree
1. My teacher encourages me to ask and answer questions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. I understand the story when we talk about the story before reading it.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. It helps me learn when I write out answers to questions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. It helps me learn when we read aloud in class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. It helps me learn when we work at completing worksheets (dittos, workbook pages).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. We spend too much time on functional reading work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. I know what to do when I come to a word I don't know.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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